FROM THE BOOKSHELF NO. 129 FEBUARY 24, 1976
AKOSH CHERNUSH

"J.R." BY WILLIAM GADDIS

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU NOW ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES...FROM THE BOOKSHELF...A SERIES IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY AKOSH CHERNUSH'S REPORT ON "J.R.", A SATIRICAL NOVEL BY WILLIAM GADDIS, PUBLISHED BY KNOPF. HERE NOW IS YOUR BOOK EDITOR_____.

EDITOR: WILLIAM GADDIS' NEW BOOK J.R. IS WRITTEN ALMOST ENTIRELY IN DIALOGUE. IT IS A HILARIOUS, PICARESQUE NOVEL, A SURREALISTIC SATIRE ABOUT THE WORLD OF FINANCE, THE CONSUMER SOCIETY AND THE SURPLUS ECONOMY. THE AUTHOR PUBLISHED HIS FIRST NOVEL, RECOGNITIONS, SOME TWENTY YEARS AGO AND IT WAS HAILED AT THE TIME AS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WORKS TO APPEAR AFTER WORLD WAR II. WHILE RECOGNITIONS WAS TOO LONG -- ALMOST ONE THOUSAND PAGES -- TOO EXPLORATORY, TOO NEW AND TOO AMBIGUOUS TO BECOME A BESTSELLER, GADDIS' NOVEL NONETHELESS HELPED INAUGURATE A WHOLE NEW SATIRICAL MOVEMENT IN AMERICAN FICTION AND INFLUENCED SUCH YOUNGER WRITERS AS THOMAS PYNCHON, JOHN BARTH AND JOSEPH HELLER.

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BORN IN 1922 IN NEW YORK CITY, WILLIAM GADDIS GRADUATED FROM HARVARD AND TRAVELED AND LIVED FOR YEARS IN FRANCE, SPAIN AND MEXICO. RIGHT NOW, HE IS WORKING ON A SCREENPLAY FOR A WESTERN FILM. THIS MIGHT NOT SEEM TO FIT THE IMAGE OF AN AVANT-GARDE AUTHOR, BUT GADDIS INSISTS THAT "EVERY AMERICAN WRITER HAS A WESTERN IN HIM SOMEWHERE.

EDITOR: (CONT'D) J.R. IS THE STORY OF A BUSINESS GENIUS, AN ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD FINANCIAL WUNDERKIND. ONE DAY A NEW YORK TEACHER TAKES HIS SIXTH GRADERS TO WALL STREET SO THEY CAN SEE FIRSTHAND HOW THE STOCK MARKET FUNCTIONS. ONE OF THE BOYS, WHOSE NAME IS J.R. VANSANT, IMMEDIATELY SIZES UP THE SITUATION AND GRASPS THE WORKINGS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE MARKET. BY REQUESTING FREE BROCHURES ABOUT BUSINESS PROPOSITIONS OFFERED IN THE NEWSPAPERS, THE BOY LEARNS HOW TO BUY UP CHEAP GOVERNMENT SURPLUS GOODS. HOW TO START AN EXPORT-IMPORT BUSINESS AND HOW TO TURN A PROFIT BY BUYING AND SELLING STOCKS AT THE RIGHT MOMENT.

J.R. VANSANT'S FIRST ENTERPRISE IS TO BUY UP NINE-THOUSAND WOODEN PICNIC FORKS, WHICH HE THEN SELLS FOR A CONSIDERABLE PROFIT. THE CHILD FINANCIAL WIZARD MAKES HIS DEALS FROM THE PUBLIC PAY PHONE AT HIS LONG ISLAND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, PUTTING HIS HANDKERCHIEF OVER THE MOUTHPIECE TO MAKE HIS VOICE SOUND DEEPER AND MORE ADULT.

FROM THE SAME SCHOOL PHONE BOOTH, J.R. BEGINS TO BUY UP BANKRUPT COMPANIES, USING ALL KINDS OF TAX LAW LOOPHOLES. HE IS CONSTANTLY ON THE TELEPHONE AND, WITHOUT REALLY UNDERSTANDING IF ALL THIS ACTIVITY IS LEGITIMATE OR NOT, HE BECOMES THE OWNER AND CHAIRMAN OF A MULTIMILLION DOLLAR CONGLOMERATE THAT, AT LEAST ON PAPER, INCLUDES FILM STUDIOS, INVESTMENT PORTFOLIOS, A BREWERY AND AN ENTIRE NEW ENGLAND MILL TOWN. THE CHILD

EDITOR: (CONT'D) TYCOON ALSO ACQUIRES A PUBLISHING COMPANY, A NURSING HOME FOR THE ELDERLY, A FUNERAL PARLOR AND A CEMETERY.

THROUGH SUCH INTRICATE MANIPULATIONS, THIS ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD BOY IN TORN SNEAKERS, FOOLS HALF THE WORLD. WITH HIS DISGUISED VOICE, HE DEALS WITH BROKERS, LAWYERS, GENERALS AND MEMBERS OF CONGRESS. WITH THE HELP OF A DROPOUT TEACHER WHO IS ALSO A FAILED COMPOSER, J.R. RENTS AN APARTMENT ON MANHATTAN'S 96TH STREET AND SETS UP HIS HEADQUARTERS THERE. THE TEACHER, ALTHOUGH HE HAS NO IDEA OF WHAT IS GOING ON AND IS PUZZLED BY THE CONSTANTLY RINGING TELEPHONE AND THE HUGE QUANTITY OF DAILY MAIL, SERVES AS J.R.'S SECRETARY.

THE PLOT OF WILLIAM GADDIS'S J.R. MAY SEEM FAR-FETCHED, EVEN ABSURD. BUT IT IS REALLY A CASE OF ART IMITATING LIFE. FOR A FEW YEARS AGO THE AMERICAN PRESS REPORTED A SIMILAR STORY ABOUT A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WHO BOUGHT AND SOLD STOCKS OVER THE PHONE, MAKING CONSIDERABLE SUMS OF MONEY BEFORE HE WAS DETECTED. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT HE DID ALL THIS WITHOUT EVER INVESTING ANY MONEY: THE BOY DIDN'T HAVE A PENNY.

WHETHER OR NOT GADDIS DREW HIS THEME FROM THAT REAL-LIFE STORY, ONE THING IS CERTAIN. IN "J.R." GADDIS HAS MADE A FORCEFUL SATIRICAL STATEMENT AGAINST THE SECULAR RELIGION OF BUSINESS AND FINANCE, AGAINST CORPORATE POWER AND AGAINST LACK OF COMMUNICATION. CLEARLY HE BELIEVES THERE CAN BE NO REAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE OR NATIONS SOLELY ON THE BASIS OF CONTRACTS, LEGAL AGREEMENTS AND TREATIES.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REPORT ON J.R., A NOVEL BY WILLIAM GADDIS. AND NOW, AN INVITATION TO JOIN US NEXT WEEK (AT THIS SAME TIME) FOR ANOTHER LOOK AT ONE OF THE MANY BOOKS AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING...FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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